Jefferson, Lincoln and Dewey

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American democracy gave us the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation. Has John Dewey's liberal version of democracy superseded this revolutionary tradition?

THE Fourth of July, which celebrates the Declaration of Independence, is an appropriate occasion for discussing the question of democracy and revolution. Every section of public opinion from the extreme right to the far left tries to find in this birth of our nation sanction for their present positions and policies. Where it cannot be found in the events and personalities involved, many of them will extort it by twisting the facts to suit their political needs.

No one is more insistent in claiming the spirit of the Fourth of July for their own than our present-day liberals, who seek to annex American democracy to their own territory and exclude the revolutionary socialists from any share of its heritage. They base their claim to a monopoly of our democratic tradition by tracing a direct and unbroken line of succession from Jefferson through Lincoln to themselves. They represent themselves as the sole heirs and legitimate continuators of these illustrious creators and champions of American democracy.

John Dewey, the noted instrumentalist philosopher, was the outstanding theoretician of this viewpoint which he expounded in many works on sociology, politics and ethics. In *Freedom And Culture*, published in 1939, he polemicized in defense of democratic liberalism against the capitalist reactionaries on the one side and the revolutionary Marxists on the other in the name of the distinctively American democratic tradition originating with Jefferson. Jefferson "was the first modern to state in human terms the principles of democracy," he wrote.

"... I believe that only one who was attached to American soil and who took a consciously alert part in the struggles of the country to attain its independence, could possibly have stated as thoroughly and intimately as did Jefferson the aims embodied in the American tradition: 'the definitions and axioms of a free government' as Lincoln called them." (p. 155)

This conception of a straight line of descent of democracy from Jeffersonism to Deweyism has a serious flaw. It leaves out of account the role of revolution, which separates the democratic movements of Jefferson and Lincoln from the liberalism of Dewey, and makes them two essentially different stages in the evolution of bourgeois

democracy. The dividing line between these two schools was drawn precisely at that point where liberalism takes issue with Marxism: the use of revolutionary methods to secure the rights of the people.

Jefferson and Lincoln incarnated one tradition in this respect; Dewey another, though all were democrats. Jefferson in the First American Revolution and Lincoln in the Civil War led movements which were not only progressive in their aims and democratic in their program, but revolutionary in their methods and achievements. Although they were not so consistently militant as Sam Adams or Wendell Phillips, both belonged in the same camp of *revolutionary* democracy.

Dewey belonged to a later tendency which grew up after the Civil War in the form of various Populist-Progressive movements. These were democratic and plebeian but not revolutionary in temper. They were liberalistic, aiming to modify the established economic and political structure by gradual reform. Whereas the older tradition created, protected and promoted American democracy by revolutionary resistance against the hosts of reaction, the Progressives sought to defend and extend democracy against the plutocracy by gradualist means and measures. The two are not the same.

The root of the differences in these two phases of bourgeois democracy is to be found in the place they occupied in the development of American capitalism. Jefferson and Lincoln headed mass movements which had to engage in revolution and civil war in order to clear away the obstacles thwarting the expansion of our national capitalism, which was in their times the mightiest accelerator of economic progress. The revolutionary democrats of the eighteenth century abolished British domination and Tory feudalism; their nineteenth century descendants overthrew the slavocracy.

Dewey and his fellow Progressives of the twentieth century had no precapitalist forces to combat. They confronted the tyranny of the capitalist class itself. But they did not seek to abolish the capitalist system or dispossess its beneficiaries. They tried to improve the conditions of life and protect the liberties of the people without injuring a capitalism which had become monopolistic, imperialistic, parasitic and increasingly reactionary. Their means were not suited to realizing their ends.

The liberalism of the Dewey school occupied the center of the political stage after the bourgeois-democratic revolution had already been consummated in the United States and before the revolutionary working-class movement had come forth on the arena. Although Dewey's childhood had been lit by the flames of the Civil War (he was born in 1859), he felt, like most of his contemporaries, that the United States had forever left its era of revolutions behind and outgrown such antiquated methods of social and political change. The rest of his long adult lifetime seemed to bear out this conclusion. Although the capitalist system was somewhat shaken from time to time, there were no radical upsets in established class relations. This highly stable national environment conditioned Dewey's social and political thinking far more than he and his admirers knew, if indeed they were at all aware of its influence.

He would never admit that revolutions have any lawful or necessary place in the development of class society, although they have erupted whenever and wherever long-standing social antagonisms have reached the breaking point. This happened twice in our nation's history.

In his arguments on the avoidability of revolutionary actions Dewey did not bother to analyze the causes of the two great revolutions in his own country. In reply to his critics in *The Philosophy of John Dewey,* for example, he referred to the France of 1789 and the Russia of 1917 but not to the North America of 1776 and 1861. However, these revolutionary periods of our own national development deserve primary attention, not only from any theoretician of social conflict, but also from any supporter of democracy. For the democracy which he worked so hard to uphold was the offspring of these revolutions.

Such gaps in his thought, which it is tempting to psychoanalyze, are characteristic. While he extolled and analyzed Jefferson's conceptions of democracy at length in *Freedom and Culture ,* he said nothing about Jefferson's forthright defense of the popular right to revolution. "I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical," Jefferson wrote to Madison from Paris on January 30, 1787.

Jefferson here sounds more like a Marxist than a Deweyan. Indeed, there is a world of difference between the two types of democrats. Jefferson was the spokesman for a *revolutionary* democracy. Dewey was the philosopher of a *liberal* democracy that abhorred revolution. The Virginian proclaimed and led a revolution. The man from Vermont sought to persuade his countrymen that revolutions were completely outmoded. To Jefferson periodic revolution, "at least once every 20 years," was "a medicine necessary for the sound health of government." To Dewey revolution was poisonous to the "body politic," even though that capitalist body has entered into decay.

The same distinction can be made between Lincoln and Dewey. Although by temperament and training a moderate Republican, Lincoln did not hesitate to uphold the right of revolution in general and to lead one in particular when he found it necessary. Dewey, on the other hand argued that revolution as such was wrong. He carried forward the *democratic* tradition of Jefferson and Lincoln but discarded their *revolutionary* positions.

Dewey assigned to philosophy the duty of "auditing of past experiences and programs of values." In his own audit of our national experience he failed to give any positive value to revolutions. This led him into an inadequate assessment of American history, and especially the mainsprings of American democracy itself.

On page 162 of *Freedom and Culture* Dewey wrote that "the source of the American democratic tradition is moral." This is an extremely shallow observation. The real source of democracy in the United States was the revolutionary struggles of its people. In 1776 and 1861, when the further growth of the nation required a new road and the forces of

reaction barred the way and tried to curb and crush the oncoming progressive classes, the revolutionary democrats took up the challenge. They armed the people, conquered the upholders of the old order in battle, and created a new social and political regime. The distinctive ideas, demands, institutions and customs of democracy were forged in these revolutionary furnaces.

Dewey gratefully accepted the results of these revolutions, from the democratic republic to free public education, and did his best to improve upon them. But he failed to understand the necessity for the ways and means by which these gains were actually secured. What an awkward theoretical position for an instrumentalist philosopher whose cardinal principle asserted that the end and the means had to be interdependent and inseparable!

Dewey did not, of course, deny that past revolutions had beneficial consequences. What he contended was that the subsequent advance of science, technology, education, and a superior understanding of method had rendered such barbaric upheavals unsuitable or unnecessary in democratic countries like the United States.

In this denial of the need for any further revolutionary action the liberal philosopher unexpectedly found himself in the company of extreme conservatives who had the same idea. They were willing to use the agencies of their government to suppress the mere expression of revolutionary ideas. Dewey protested whenever they did so. This did honor to his concern for democracy, though it did not testify to the validity of his views.

Moreover, by adhering so rigidly to his anti-revolutionary doctrine, Dewey actually violated the spirit of his own instrumentalism which taught that no means to an end was to be ruled out in advance of the consummation of the process. Although he did not ban resort to revolution under all circumstances, for all practical purposes — and that is what counts in reality as well as in pragmatic theory — he did not give it any weight as a means of progressive social action in the future of American life.

What basis is there for this liberalistic prejudice against revolution? Let us acknowledge that revolution is an unusual method for purging the social organism of poisonous elements. Such convulsions do not happen every decade in the life of a great nation. In the United States they have come along only once a century.

But these extraordinary events do not occur without sufficient reason. Their underlying causes are lodged in economic developments which sharpen the conflicts among opposing classes.

No people takes the road to revolution when easier and more conventional ways of remedying their ills and reaching their objectives appear available to them. Jefferson correctly pointed out in the Declaration of Independence: "All experience has shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed." So long as they can, they try to confine their contests and solve their problems within the bounds of the established order.

Revolutions and counter-revolutions erupt only when the burning issues at stake between the contending classes can no longer be adjudicated by conciliation. Tom Paine recognized this early in 1776 when he proclaimed that after Concord and Lexington the issues between the Patriots and the Crown had to be referred "from arguments to arms." Senator Seward of New York recognized this after the Dred Scot decision in 1857 when he spoke of "the irrepressible conflict" developing between the slaveholders and the North. These radicals were far more realistic than the liberalistic Dewey whose general argument was that social disputes must invariably be subject to negotiation and compromise.

The American people have twice been compelled to embark upon revolution after they had already tried the methods of conciliation many times and found that they failed to work. They were pushed to the point where they had either to submit to outright tyranny by a minority or adopt the most radical measures to ensure that the will of the majority prevailed. Both times they undertook the revolutionary way in order, as Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, to "throw off absolute despotism" and "provide new guards for their future security."

When Dewey recommended the adjustment of grievances by mutual compromise as a panacea to cure the revolutionary itch, he overlooked the fact that a revolutionary crisis comes about precisely because the methods of compromise have become played out. Peoples approach the road to revolution hesitantly, by way of successive approximations. They do not adopt the most militant forms of action until the most advanced among them have become convinced by considerable experience that their urgent interests cannot otherwise be safeguarded.

Our forefathers were no less peace-loving, intelligent and inclined to moderation than the American people of today. They did not want or expect revolution, nor did they welcome civil strife. Is it reasonable to believe that they finally embraced that alternative without sufficient reason?

In fact, they were driven to take up arms by historical circumstances beyond their control and independent of the good, or ill, will of the participants on either side. The propelling factor in both cases was the initiative of the counter-revolution. When King George's troops occupied and blockaded Boston and threatened other provinces with similar treatment, when the Confederacy split the Union, fired on Fort Sumter, and ran up the black flag of pro-slave rebellion, the American people saw there was no room left for retreat or compromise. It was "liberty — or death!"

The masses of our nation twice became revolutionized, not by preconception, by desire, or by accident, but through the harsh necessities of their class struggles. They made the transition from the stage of conciliation to that of intransigent battle under the whiplash of reaction. They arrived empirically at the conclusion that they had to defend their rights and their future by revolutionary means because the aggressors of the old order were using the most desperate and deadly means to hold on to their privileged positions. This pragmatic course of development of all great revolutions, including our

own, provides the most telling refutation of the dogmatic warnings of the pragmatic liberal philosophers against recourse to revolution.

The revolutions which appear to obtuse conciliators as aberrations in the course of our national development find their logical and scientific explanation in this dynamic of the class struggle. However irrational this climactic phase of the class struggle may seem to the liberal mind, it was nevertheless the inescapable outcome of long-simmering social antagonisms which finally reached the boiling point and exploded. Revolutionary action became the only reasonable and realistic alternative to the threat of enslavement and national retrogression.

All this may be true of the past; but whatever their previous connection, democracy and revolution have nothing more to do with each other in this country, insist the liberals. Indeed, the specter of a workers revolution would imperil our democracy because it might provoke a counter-revolutionary dictatorship by the more powerful capitalist class. The future of democracy depends upon diminishing class differences, class feelings, class actions, not upon developing them. How this can be done without abolishing class relations in our society, the liberals do not tell us.

They look to "all people of good will," regardless of their class positions and interests, to unite against attacks upon democracy from any quarter. The Marxists do not deny that constant pressure has to be exerted upon the capitalist regime to protect the liberties and improve the conditions of the people. But they propose to promote this aim by different agencies and methods. They call upon the organized working class to take the lead in the fight for democracy on all issues in alliance with the oppressed minorities and progressive middle-class elements. Through the successive stages of such a militant and independent movement on the economic and political arena, the masses will in the end come to the conclusion that their rights cannot be secured without the replacement of capitalist rule by their own workers and farmers government.

This line of revolutionary class struggle is utterly fantastic, say the liberals. Revolution may have happened in the past, but there are no compelling reasons why that pattern has to be repeated in the nation's future. We now have enough scientific knowledge, intelligence, maturity and good will to settle conflicts of social interest by more reasonable means and to advance step by step toward a better life.

This liberal position and outlook hinges upon two big assumptions about the prospects of American capitalism. One is that the American people will receive an increasing measure of peace, security, liberty and material benefits from capitalism. It must be admitted that the urge for revolutionary change would be minimal in that case.

On top of this, the liberals pile an even greater assumption. Even if serious social crises do occur, they expect the financial magnates to be sensible and self-sacrificing enough to renounce their power and privileges and permit the people to come into their own. In that event the methods of social action and political reform advocated by the liberals would have to be acknowledged as correct.

However, these hypotheses rest upon shaky foundations. Capitalism is no longer expanding and progressive. It is a retreating and increasingly reactionary social system on a world-historical scale. Sooner or later, even its highly favored American sector will be hit by the accumulated effects of this decline.

When the shocks administered by these crises set the workers in motion, will the American monopolists, who have so much to lose, prove to be more enduringly wedded to democracy than to the defense of their own profits and privileges? Such a presumption can find no precedent either in our national past or in the conduct of capitalist rulers elsewhere. The British overlords and the Tory landed proprietors of the eighteenth century, and the Southern slave-holders of the nineteenth century, furiously resisted the loss of their sovereignty and property. And when the capitalists of other countries have been threatened with dispossession in the twentieth century, they have invariably resorted to military or fascist dictatorships or engaged in imperialist military adventures.

The capitalist class have always subordinated concern for the rights of the people to the protection of their material interests — and in any clash between the two democracy is sacrificed. Yet the liberals count on them to respect the institutions and claims of democracy when their entire existence is at stake!

The liberals are blind to the fact that the ties between capitalism and democracy have grown weaker and not stronger in the epoch of imperialism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the revolutions which gave national supremacy to the capitalists propelled democracy forward at the same time. From the Declaration of Independence to the Emancipation Proclamation the ascendancy of capitalism was compatible with the progress of democracy.

As the monopolists have concentrated political, economic and social power in their hands, democracy has suffered. From the 1880's onward, the forces of Progressivism captained by liberal reformers of one kind or another have waged many battles to protect democracy against the plutocracy. Despite all they have done over these seventy years, American democracy is insecure and its future overcast.

Why did the last war "for the four freedoms" usher in instead a still unfinished rampage of reaction at home? The liberals interpret the witch-hunt as a result of the cold war. But it is not the product of international conditions alone; it also has deep roots in class tensions at home. The restrictions upon freedom are the reflexes of a militarized monopolist regime which is unsure of the wholehearted allegiance of its own citizens. They are symptoms of an organic trend toward despotism among the ruling class.

Why does Big Business fear the people so much even though it dominates the mental environment through control of the agencies of mass information and entertainment and dominates the government through its control of the two major parties? Because its dollar democracy is far from being as democratic as it is advertised.

The workers who produce the wealth have no decisive voice in operating the economy. They do not have the most elementary of all rights — democratic control over their means of livelihood. Five and a half million unemployed testify that the profits of property owners take precedence over the economic welfare of the workers who are the majority of the American people.

Truman's decision to invade Korea without consulting Congress, let alone the American public, proved that the war-making powers of life and death are beyond the control of the people. A single chief executive and his military advisers can unloose the H-Bomb at any time without notice.

And it is no secret that Negroes have far less democratic rights than other parts of the population.

This erosion of democracy is not a passing phenomenon; it indicates that democracy and capitalism, which once went hand in hand, are more and more at odds with each other. The republic of Jefferson and Lincoln was the guardian of democracy. The imperialism of Truman and Eisenhower is the gravedigger of the democracy they created.

The big property owners were not the chief custodians of democracy even in the most progressive days of U.S. capitalism. They tolerated the institutions of democracy while manipulating and restricting them to their advantage. The backbone of democracy was constituted by the middle and lower classes of the population.

Nowadays the middle classes have receded in social importance, leaving only one social force strong enough to defend democracy against "the clear and present danger" of Big Business reaction. That is the working class allied with the Negro minority.

In order to salvage, strengthen and reshape American democracy, a new social-economic foundation is required, backed up by a system of political rule really representing the majority of the people. The democracy of the past was tied up with the advancement of capitalism. Now that its achievements are threatened by the retrogression of capitalism, the democracy of the future is necessarily bound up with the progress of labor and the program of the socialist movement.

It took two revolutions to make the United States democratic and keep it that way. It will take a third to make our country thoroughly and securely democratic. Just as the establishment of democracy in the United States involved the abolition of foreign domination and of feudal and slave property, so the preservation and extension of democracy demands the removal of the equally outmoded power and property of the financial and industrial magnates. Bourgeois democracy has to be supplanted by the higher form of workers' democracy.

It is all very well to say that democracy has to be transferred from a capitalist to a socialist basis, reply the liberals. But how do you socialists expect such a change to be accomplished when not only the capitalists oppose it but the American people, including

most of the workers and Negroes, do not accept your proposition and program, or even know about them? Wouldn't it be more realistic to try to expand democracy without overstepping the existing economic and political framework?

That is precisely what the American people will try to do for an extended period of indeterminate duration. The question is: what will be the outcome of their efforts to enforce their claims and obtain their just rights by exerting pressure upon the capitalist regime?

The liberals stake their position upon the capacities of capitalism to satisfy the demands of the people. The Marxists have no such confidence. They predict that the harder the masses press and the more concessions they exact, the more obdurate and tyrannical the financial oligarchy will become. The sharpening of their struggles will ultimately force a showdown on the issue of democracy and revolution as it did in 1776 and 1861.

But the alignment of social forces and the objectives of the struggle will be quite different. The people will not combine with the progressive capitalists against the upholders of the old order but against the capitalist attempts to impose their naked despotism upon the nation. The workers and their allies will discover in the course of their defensive actions that, in order to bring about "a new birth of freedom" in a broader democracy and smash the dictatorship of Big Business, socialist measures will have to be taken.

The consciousness of the new fighters for freedom will be transformed as the struggles between capital and labor proceed from one stage to the next. Regardless of their mutual relations at any given stage, the mass of workers will approach and appraise a maturing revolutionary crisis in a different way than the socialist vanguard. By virtue of their scientific insight into the necessary development of capitalism, the socialists are able to connect the beginnings of the conflict between capital and labor with its culmination. In each successive phase of their collisions, they foresee the growth and maturing of their irreconcilable antagonisms and consciously prepare themselves for the showdown.

The masses, on the other hand, move along from one landmark to the next, testing their strength, improving their positions, increasing their understanding without as yet grasping the whole line of development and its goal. The basic revolutionary significance of their movement becomes disclosed to them only at its denouement, when it crashes down upon them in full force.

The empirical conclusions they mbrace at this decisive turning point then coincide with the theoretical and programmatic positions previously formulated by the Marxist and repudiate in practice the conservatism of the short-sighted liberals.

This conception of the development of the class struggle is vehemently denied by liberalism and Deweyism, Is characteristic philosophical expression. Although some of its most radical exponents see that capitalism is more and more hostile to the perpetuation

of democracy and may even have to give way to socialism at some time and in some way, they all agree that revolution is not — and should not — be that way. They forbid the contest for national supremacy between capital and labor to go beyond the limits they prescribe. But the essence of all forward social movements in history is that they break through the limits of action laid down in the past.

The present-day liberals who contend that tyranny may be combated up to the point of revolution, but not beyond, part company with the militant democrats of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and repudiate the most precious part of their democratic heritage. Jefferson and Lincoln did not shrink from proclaiming the right to revolution as the ultimate guarantee of all other democratic rights and from following through in action with the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation.

That is where the Marxists clasp hands with Jefferson and Lincoln. Although these great Americans were for capitalism and we are for socialism, all of us stand upon common ground in recognizing the organic link between democracy and revolution. They were the revolutionary democrats of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Marxists are the genuine revolutionary democrats of the twentieth century.

Many liberals refused to speak out for the Japanese-American deportees during the Second World War or for the Communist victims of the Smith Act today. The Marxists have consistently defended the rights of all victims of persecution, whether they were Jehovah's Witnesses, pacifists, Communists, Negroes, Puerto Ricans or Japanese-Americans. We have opposed all forms of discriminatory legislation from the Taft-Hartley Act to the restrictions upon minority parties. While combating every attack upon the democratic rights of any section of the American people, we have pointed out that the salvation of American freedom depends upon organizing an independent labor and socialist movement able to remove the capitalist breeders and beneficiaries of reaction from power.

Thus the tradition of the militant defense and expansion of democracy is continued, not by the liberal pretenders who have turned their back upon the next American revolution, but by the Marxists who are faced toward it.

(*end*)

See also: The participation of John Dewey what became known as the “Dewey Commission” hearings on the charges made against Leon Trotsky in Stalin's infamous 'Moscow Trials.”

Novak, George

Introduction to 'The Case of Leon Trotsky' (the verbatim transcript of John Dewey, Chairman, Carleton Beals [resigned], Otto Ruehle, Benjamin Stolberg, John Finerty, Albert Goldman, counsel) (1937, Merit Publishers)

(Excerpts)

'This book contains the verbatim transcript of the March 1937 hearings held by the Preliminary Commission of Inquiry ... to ascertain all the available facts about the Moscow Trial proceedings in which Trotsky and his son, Leon Sedov, were the principal accused and to render a judgement based upon those facts.

The reasons for the commission's formation and its work were bound up with one of the most momentous and tragic political events of the nineteen-thirties: the prolonged blood purges and frame-up trials through which Stalin consolidated his personal terroristic tyranny over the Soviet Union.

.... The members of the full commission were John Dewey, its chairman, America's foremost philosopher and liberal; Otto Ruehle, biographer of Karl Marx and former member of the Reichstag who alone with Liebknecht had voted against war in 1914-1915, Benjamin Stolberg and Suzanne La Follette, American journalists; Carleton Beals, authority on Latin-American affairs; Alfred Rosmer, who in 1920-21had been a member of the Communist International; Wendelin Thomas, leader of the Wilhelmshaven sailors' revolt in November 1918 (etc.)

(Book available through Pathfinder Press, New York).